

EFFECTIVE ONLINE TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION

Effective online teaching is a popular topic in today's educational technology journals due to the vital role that educators play in the teaching and learning process. The author provides insight into effective online teachers and highlight training and mentoring practices for online instructors at the University of Phoenix.

Challenges to Teacher Quality

The discipline of online learning is a distinctive one that continues to grow as more higher education institutions offer online classes and degree programs. The rapid growth of profit distance education organizations has signaled the advent of a new educational era where students are given a diversity of opportunities to pursue degree programs. Any discussion of quality in distance education is a complex one due to advances in technology and a growing competition in the market place for students.

The discussion of quality is therefore both emotional and influenced by a perception that on-line learning changes power structures as well as traditional roles-affecting some with a fear of loss, a fear that the new structure or role will be difficult to fulfill or be less satisfying, and a fear that the new marketplace could bring irreparable harm to institutions to which individuals have devoted their careers and lives (Meyer, 2002, p.11).

There are legitimate concerns about the quality of online academic programs. Muirhead's (2004) research and literature reviews on interactivity, reveal problems with students experiencing marked differences in the quality of their online classes involving problems with adequate teacher feedback on their assignments and inconsistent

teacher interaction in student dialogs. These are teacher related problems that can be traced to a variety of factors: lack of teacher training and mentoring, weak administrative accountability systems, teachers who operate by a teacher-centered model of education and teachers who are simply too busy to devote time to their classes.

Nichols and Anderson (2005, p. 3) discuss the need for educators and instructional designers to understand the unique nature and instructional complexity of online education:

?E-learning pedagogies are *probabilistic* ... that is to say, there is no such thing as the 'perfect' approach because of the diverse contexts within which e-learning tools are applied, including the diversity between the students themselves and the varying teaching and learning demands of particular courses.

?E-learning pedagogies are *constrained* by institutional factors, including the technologies and applications supported by the institution, quality assurance policies and standards, availability of staff training and support in e-learning, the existing level of staff proficiency in technology and e-learning, the perspectives of staff responsible for coordinating e-learning development, and the amount of time and funding made available for e-learning practice.

?E-learning pedagogies must be *defensible*, that is, not used haphazardly but rather intelligently, preferably with some reference to prove educational practice. While e-learning pedagogies could be considered as specific to technological settings, they must also be underpinned by

accepted educational theory.

? E-learning pedagogies are *evolving* in the sense that new modes of practice and enhanced technological tools are continually emerging. E-learning practice cannot remain static, but should instead seek to make the most of new opportunities.

These insights into the nature of online learning reveal the dynamic qualities of teaching and learning in the virtual environment. Teachers play an essential role in making online learning relevant and meaningful to students while striving to meet required curriculum objectives and standards.

Research on Online Instructors

Salmon (2000) has extensive online experience as a trainer of instructors for the Business School at the Open University (United Kingdom). The Open University has been an international leader in experimenting with new educational methods and ideas. Salmon offers remarkable insights from her studies on Computer Mediated Conferencing (CMC) at the Open University. Research findings were based on a combination of content analysis of online communication of students and teachers, focused group work and testing and evaluation of a new teaching and learning model.

Today's online instructors are challenged by a growing diversity of students who have a variety of expectations, learning styles, computer and communication skills that influence their online participation in learning communities. An important question for instructors is how can they effectively enable students to become active self-directed learners who will enjoy working with others? Salmon's (2000) studies have produced a five stage model to help train and prepare teachers for online work:

- ? Access and motivation.
- ? Online socialization
- ? Information exchange

? Knowledge construction

? Development

The five-step model reflects a positive progression in the quality and intensity of interaction between students and their teachers. The online instructor's role is multidimensional and changes at different stages depending upon the student needs and circumstances within each class. Stage 1 involves helping new students become familiar with the software of the computer-mediated classes. Students can experience some technical problems that must resolve before they are able to participate online. Then, it is vital that instructors welcome the students to the class and offer assistance to help them feel at ease. Students can feel somewhat embarrassed by their struggles in learning of how to use the software. Instructors can alleviate the student's anxiety by sharing email messages, that stress they are supportive and optimistic in tone.

Therefore, it is important to know the "audience" which is constantly changing from class to class. For instance, why are some students just browsing or staying on the fringes of the class dialog? Salmon (2000) observes that even the "lurkers" or browsers are learning because they might be the sponges that take the information. Instructors should spend time getting to know their students to discover the reasons behind their hesitancy to make a significant contribution to their classes. Perhaps, some people lack confidence (Stage 2) and it is important to give these individuals time to read and enjoy the contributions of their classmates. Then, as students become more comfortable with the online culture they can move into sharing and exchanging information (Stage 3). The advent of Stage 4 affirms the importance of instructors becoming more intentional in their online remarks. Instructors need to weave their student's contributions into creative narratives that highlight course principles and

theories. Instructors will notice a definite change in their students who move from being merely knowledge transmitters to creators or authors of innovative ideas.

Salmon (2000) encourages instructors to develop online assignments and interactions that foster critical thinking skills. Stage 5 is the highest level of learning and students are taught to use higher order thinking skills. Students are challenged to demonstrate reflective thinking by interpreting information at a deeper level. In fact, students will begin to acquire new cognitive skills and learn to monitor and evaluate their thinking. At this stage, instructors will need to devote time to creating a learning environment that fosters reflective online dialog.

The research studies at the Open University have provided the data to develop a comprehensive chart of five e-moderator or facilitator competencies:

- ? Understanding of online process
- ? Technical skills

- ? Online communication skills
- ? Content expertise
- ? Personal characteristics (Salmon, 2000).

The chart provides an excellent overview of the five instructor competencies. It can be effectively used in a variety of ways: instructional design specialists that are creating online curriculum materials, distance educator administrators who are recruiting online personnel, trainers of online faculty members who need guidelines to help them make accurate assessments and individual instructors who want to develop a professional development plan.

Garrison and Anderson (2003) have developed a promising new distance education model known as the community of inquiry which involves three main elements: social presence, cognitive presence and teacher presence. The model reflects a greater emphasis on social factors and less attention to psychological

E-Moderator Online Competencies (Salmon 2000, p. 41)

QUALITY	1. CONFIDENT	2. CONSTRUCTIVE	3. DEVELOPMENTAL
Understanding of online process	Confident in providing a focus for conferences, intervening, judging participants' interest, experimenting with different approaches, and being a role model	Able to build online trust & purpose; to know who should be online and what they should be doing	Ability to develop & enable others, act as catalyst, foster discussion, summarize, restate, challenge, monitor understanding and misunderstanding, take feedback
Technical skills	Confident in operational understanding of software in use as a user; reasonable keyboard skills; good access	Able to appreciate the basic structures of CMC, and the WWW and Internet's potential for learning	Know how to use special features of software for e-moderators, e.g. controlling, archiving
Online communication skills	Confident in being courteous, polite, and respectful in online (written) communication	Able to write concise, energizing, personable online messages	Able to engage with people online (not the machine or the software)
Content expertise	Confident in having knowledge and experience to share, and willing and able to add own contributions	Able to encourage sound contributions from others	Able to trigger debates by posing intriguing questions
Personal characteristics	Confident in being determined and motivated as an e-moderator	Able to establish an online identity as e-moderator	Able to adapt to new teaching contexts, methods, audiences & roles

QUALITY	4. FACILITATING	5. KNOWLEDGE SHARING	6. CREATIVE
Understanding of online process	Know when to control groups, when to let go, how to bring in non-participants, know how to pace discussion and use time on line.	Able to explore ideas, develop arguments, promote valuable threads, close off unproductive threads, choose when to archive build a learning community	Able to use a range of CMC conferencing approaches from structured activities to free wheeling discussions, and to evaluate and judge success of conferences
Technical skills	Able to use special features of software to explore learner use e.g. message history	Able to create links between CMC and other features of learning programmes	Able to use software facilities to create and manipulate conferences and to generate an online learning environment
Online communication skills	Able to interact through e mail and conferencing and achieve interaction between others	Able to value diversity with cultural sensitivity	Able to communicate comfortably without visual cues
Content expertise	Carry authority by awarding marks fairly to students for their CMC participation and contributions	Know about valuable resources (e.g. on the WWW) and refer participants to them	Able to enliven conferences through use of multi media and electronic resources
Personal characteristics	Show sensitivity to online relationships and communication	Show a positive attitude, commitment and enthusiasm for online learning	Know how to create a useful, online learning community

which has characterized the current generation of research studies. Additionally, there is a need to study online interaction from a communication theory perspective by investigating a diversity of variables such as length and number of messages, type of information shared and the amount of time between responses. The studies would provide deeper descriptions and insights into the nature of interactivity.

Training and Mentoring Online Instructors

Contemporary online instructors have a tendency to depend upon "intuition." The intuition teaching method of learning is quite time consuming and frustrating because individuals must learn by trial and error. A review of research studies on computer-mediated graduate classes reveals that the quality of instruction varies from class to class within a school. Students indicate that one teacher will provide a class structure that promotes good dialog and provide consistent teacher feedback on their work. Yet, in another online class, students will share stories of teachers who provided little interaction. For instance,

one study respondent related that "I have tutors who do little more than respond 'good job' to my posts, tutors who haven't responded at all, and tutors who have taken a great deal of time to post a meaningful, thoughtful-provoking response (Muirhead, 1999, p. 54)."

The new online instructor often has an assortment of feelings when he or she starts their first online class. They are excited about teaching online and participating in a new instructional role that is filled with diverse educational challenges for professional growth. Yet, the new teacher can have fears about failing that need to be addressed prior to the start of their online class. The teachers' fears are about venturing into the unknown educational areas that they have little or no knowledge about. It is important that teachers are given opportunities to become familiar with the basic elements of their online course work such as how to communicate using e-mail, strengths and weaknesses of the course software, and key people to contact for technology expertise. For instance, the University of Phoenix has developed a large technical

staff for teachers and students that are available to meet immediate technology needs on a 24/7 basis. The technical staff can be reached by toll free telephone which helps individuals to resolve computer related issues.

The wise administrator will provide a training period for new instructors to help them learn in an actual online environment. Also, it helps distance education schools offer information on their policies, organizational practices and educational philosophy. Lynch (2002) notes that "it is only by actually experiencing the online environment as a student, that teachers finally understand student fears, stress, frustrations, and joys in learning in the Web-based environment (p. 67)."

The University of Phoenix (UOP) has developed a rigorous training and mentoring program for their online and on ground faculty candidates. Currently, there are approximately 20,000 instructors who facilitate classes for over 300, 000 students who are online and at 180 campuses in the United States, Puerto Rico, Alberta and British Columbia (UOP Fact Book, 2005). The university places a high priority on training to insure that instructors can make the transition from a traditional to a learner centered educational model. Students benefit from having trained instructors who can provide positive online experiences that promote high academic standards and foster intellectually stimulating online dialogs.

Online training is designed to prepare faculty candidates to use Outlook Express software and become effective in sharing in the virtual environment. Muirhead and Betz (2002, p. 70) "The second goal is related to the context and content of working with an institution of higher education online, including policies and practices, and learning how to create clear, respectful, and engaging communications in an online environment." The third objective of training is to equip individual to be ready for ir

their mentorship which is next step in the training process. Mentoring new online teachers should follow closely after their initial training to consolidate and enlarge upon what was learned and apply it in their own online courses. Ideally, new teachers should have their first online class within one or two months of training.

Faculty schedulers need to devise a system that integrates new teachers into online classes as rapidly as possible. It is also important to identify veteran faculty members who can participate in the mentoring program. Administrators need to recruit teacher-mentors who possess subject matter expertise, excellent communication skills and have experience teaching distance education classes. It is also important to create a teacher salary structure that fairly compensates the mentor for sharing knowledge and skills during the mentorship (Muirhead, 2002).

Henry (1996) provides relevant advice for effective mentoring:

- ? Maintain regular contact. Mentors should assume they are the givers in the relationship. Consistent contact models increase dependability and builds trust. At least weekly contact is recommended.
- ? Always be honest. Trust and respect are the foundations on which mentorships are built.
- ? Avoid being judgmental of a protege's life situation. Acceptance without conditions communicates that your concern comes without strings attached.
- ? Avoid excessive gift giving. And don't do for a protege what s/he can do for him/herself. Your greatest gift is to help a person discover his/her own solutions to problems.
- ? Don't expect to have all the answers. Sometimes just listening attentively is all people need.
- ? Help your protégé access resources and expand support networks. Discuss the importance of

maintaining positive relationships.

- ? Be clear about your expectations and your boundaries. Set up ground rules and communicate them.
- ? Avoid being overwhelmed by your protege's problems. Remain calm and dispassionate to help solve problems.
- ? Respect confidentiality. Good friends do.
- ? If the relationship seems to stall, hang in there (Henry -- paragraph 4)

Henry's recommendations stress the importance of cultivating a positive and productive relationship between the mentor and faculty candidate. Mentors can generate relational conflicts by being too controlling and not giving their colleagues the freedom to take some professional risks in their online classes. The wise mentor always strives to create a learning relationship that promotes self-directed attitudes and behaviors in their faculty candidates. The primary goal of the mentorship is to help prepare individuals to be effective instructors who will have the skills, knowledge and confidence to independently teach their students.

At the University of Phoenix, faculty candidates have two weeks of preparation time to work with their mentor prior to the start of the class. It is a time where the mentor can provide feedback on their lectures, syllabus and personal biography. The pre-course activities enable new teachers to have their curriculum plans and materials prepared for the first week of class. The preparation phase is a vital element in the mentoring process and if the new teacher fails to demonstrate adequate progress on their course materials, the mentor will postpone their first class. The mentorship process does provide diverse opportunities for new teachers to reflect on their instructional plans and strategies. Mentorship programs should offer new faculty members:

- ? a structured process that has clear goals
- ? a nurturing and supportive climate
- ? offer professional insights and reflective dialog (SchoolNet, SA, 2002).

Veteran mentors devote a lot of time in helping their faculty candidate to prepare a solid course syllabus. A syllabus that lacks clarity about teacher expectations for assignments will cause frustration and confusion because students will not know what is expected of them. The syllabus can provide clear instructions for students while offering them a time management device to integrate school work into their busy daily lives. Also, the syllabus plays a vital role in helping students understand the teacher's expectations and establishes a foundation for positive learning experiences. Fullmer-Umari (2000) a faculty member at the University of Phoenix recommends that teachers should consider using seven key elements in their syllabus:

1. Course description and overview of subjects covered during the class
2. Teacher's biographical sketch that highlights both professional and personal experiences
3. Teacher's contact information (e-mail addresses and telephone numbers)
4. Assignment schedule for each week of the course (papers, readings, etc.)
5. Review of university/class policies for attendance, grading, participation, late assignments, tests and specific details on academic honesty
6. Request for student biographical sketches to be e-mailed to a class online newsgroup
7. Discuss frequently asked questions about assignments and computer problems.

Further Research Needed

There have been over 10,000 studies completed on what constitutes teacher effectiveness in traditional educational settings which highlights the importance of this issue. Seldin (1991) observes the researchers have found that effective teachers "...are masters of their subject, can organize and emphasize, can clarify ideas and point out relationships, can motivate students, and are reasonable, open, concerned and imaginative human beings" (p. 1). Yet, research into distance educators is far less extensive and more research is needed in the following areas: investigating online teacher training programs and identifying which certain training techniques are the most productive, studying teacher communication patterns to better understand their role, encouraging critical thinking and creativity and the academic effectiveness of blended learning formats. Distance educators must continue to develop new educational paradigms that represent theories and practices which accurately reflect the realities of the online learning environment.

Conclusion

It is vital to realize that contemporary research "...falls short of establishing links between specific teacher behaviors and probable learning outcomes" (Lucas & Murray, 2002, p. 44). A growing consensus has favored teachers creating active learning opportunities in their classes, encouraging students to acquire a foundation of content knowledge and fostering higher order thinking skills. Distance educators are challenged by using a text-driven form of education. Today's online classes rely heavily on printed materials and teacher created lectures and handouts. Therefore, the use of language becomes a focal point for teachers and students because the entire communication process is closely linked to thinking. Kirby and Goodpaster (2002) note "language works

intimately with all aspects of our thinking ...sensing, feeling, remembering, creating, organizing, reasoning, evaluating, deciding, persuading, and acting. As we become more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of language, and as we increase and refine our own language, we will think better (p. 98). Distance educators need to be skillful communicators who integrate meaningful instructional activities into their classes that promote internalization of critical thinking skills and knowledge. It is one of the unique challenges of teaching online but it is essential to prepare students for leadership roles.

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